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Green Screen or Smokescreen? Hollywood's Messages about Nature and the Environment

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Abstract

This research examines ideologies about nature and the environment in popular, animated Hollywood films – including *The Lorax, Wall-E*, and *Ice Age 2* – through a symptomatic reading as defined by Althusser and Balibar (1965). The primary goal of analysis is to elucidate key omissions in these texts through an assessment of the *problematic* – defined in this research as an *a priori* answer to perceived audience concerns regarding the role of consumerism and corporate culture in environmental problems. Silences in the films revolve around: how environmental problems are defined; what the consequences are; who the responsible parties are; and what potential solutions exist to mitigate them. The significance of the research is underscored by the formation of an increasingly intimate relationship between children, consumer culture, and commercial media in the U.S., as well as the increasingly dire information emerging about global environmental issues. *Green Screen* – the opening title for this work – is an industry term used to describe the combination of two images on a green or blue screen to create an illusion. This analysis demonstrates how the term becomes an appropriate metaphor for the dual, often conflicting messages that commercial film provides for its young audiences about pivotal environmental problems and their potential resolution.

Keywords: hypercommercialism, political economy, media, environment

Green Screen or Fade to Black?
Hollywood's Messages about Nature and the Environment

In 2012, Universal Pictures released *The Lorax*, a film based on Dr. Seuss' children's book of the same name published 30 years earlier. The book addressed the environmental harm caused by overconsumption, and Universal claimed the movie contained the same message; however, it also included embedded advertisements and numerous product tie ins (Hetter, 2012). Product placement and the flood of marketing that accompanied the film drew criticism that the studio was corrupting Seuss' original environmental message by replacing it with one of consumption. Drawing from the controversy surrounding *The Lorax*, this research seeks to identify messages regarding environmental problems and their solutions as presented in popular Hollywood movies for children – including *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* (Fox Pictures, 2006), *Wall-E* (Disney, 2008) and *The Lorax* (Universal, 2012) – through the *symptomatic reading* defined by Althusser and Balibar (2009). The analysis provides the basis for a critique of American hypercommercialism and consumer culture as contextualized within a political economy framework, placing the focus on concentrated media ownership and the concomitant drive for profit as a way to understand how messages about the environment are distorted by the culture industry for young audiences.

The significance of the research is underscored by the formation of an increasingly intimate relationship between children, consumer culture, and commercial media in the U.S. According to McDonaugh and Brereton (2010), "film has a profound influence in framing how we conceptualize and address ourselves and lifestyles, and by inference our global problems" (134). *Green Screen* – the opening title for this work – is a media industry term used to describe a technique where a green or blue screen is used to combine two images to create an illusion.

This analysis demonstrates how the term becomes an appropriate metaphor for the dual, often conflicting messages that commercial film provides for its young audiences about pivotal national and transnational environmental problems and their potential resolution.

Literature Review

As Kellner notes, dominant ideologies "must be understood within the context of the political economy and system of production of culture" (1995, p. 37). Currently there is a small number of Hollywood "majors" owned by the well-known roster of conglomerates – including Universal Pictures (Comcast), Columbia (Sony), Paramount (Viacom), Warner Bros (Time Warner), 20th Century Fox, and Walt Disney/Buena Vista pictures (Disney). While there are some "breakthrough" studios (like independently-operated LionsGate, which produced the surprise blockbuster series *Twilight* and, more recently, the *Hunger Games* franchise), movies from the six "majors" dominate the American movie landscape, accounting for 76% of films released in 2012 (Nash Information Services, 2013). The fact that a small number of players owns an increasingly large amount of the U.S. media landscape is well documented in academic literature (McChesney, 2008, 2004; Andersen and Gray, 2007; Bagdikian, 2004; Crispin Miller, 2002), and likely comes as no surprise to U.S. media scholars. As a result, this paper outlines existing political economy discussions as they relate directly to mediated representations of the environment. While broader trends are considered, special attention is paid to recent changes in children's consumer culture and the focus on the child audience in Hollywood's treatment of environmental issues.

The Media Are Hypercommercial

The trend of media deregulation and resulting waves of conglomeration that started in earnest in the 1980s and have continued to the present day are well documented in political economy scholarship, leaving few arguments that the U.S. media system is both hypercommercial and highly concentrated. In his discussion of hypercommercialism, McChesney contends that American culture is subject to incessant commercial "carpet bombing" (2004. p. 146) that leaves no space untouched. The trend of hypercommercialism in the U.S. is in perfect step with the exponential growth of consumer culture in the U.S., with numerous scholars noting that consumption has become the foundation of the U.S. cultural system (McDonald and Wearing, 2013; Schor, 2009; Turow and McAllister, 2009; McAllister, 2006; Steinberg, 2011).

Most germane to the current project is the recognition of a relatively new focus on children by American corporations. In the corporate system, children are not excluded from consumer culture but instead are highlighted in it. Schor (2004) notes that marketing to the child audience became a multi-billion dollar industry when companies realized the increased spending power of children. The primary consequence of this recognition is that children are being incorporated into the marketplace as part of a broader trend in American capitalism where "life stages" translate into different types of potential markets (Langer, 2004, p. 254). Steinberg (2011) terms this new marketing focus on children as "kinderculture," a type of hypercommercialism aimed directly at children. The three key implications of a new children's consumer culture is that children, now considered a highly lucrative market, are targeted as a key demographic (McAllister, 2006; Schor 2004); invited into consumerist identities at increasingly

young ages (Hill, 2011; Jennings, 2006); and offered very few noncommercial opportunities in American media culture (Schor, 2004).

The Culture Industry in a Hypercommercial Society

The hypercommercial milieu in which Hollywood operates has a well-documented impact on all aspects of the industry – from origination to content and marketing. While the increase of product placement in movies has been well documented (Andersen and Gray, 2007; McChesney, 2008; Wasko, 2003; Crispin-Miller, 2002), commercially-driven, non-media entities – like toymaker Hasbro – are going a step farther by partnering with studios to produce blockbusters like *GI Joe: Retaliation* (2013), *Battleship* (2011), and *Transformers* (2009) [1]. The reason toymakers have gotten into the movie-making business is clear: the potential to create highly lucrative ancillary markets using product tie-ins, resulting in an "unprecedented synergy" between movie producers and merchandisers (Townsend, 2011, p. 56). As a result, many contemporary "blockbuster" films are criticized for simply being vehicles to sell products to young audiences (Townsend, 2011; Barnes, 2010; Wasko, 2003), prompting Andersen and Gray (2007) to suggest that "films are no longer singular narratives, rather, they are iterations of entertainment supertexts, multimedia forms that can be expanded and resold almost ad infinitum" (176).

Representations of Environmental Problems in Hollywood

In a hypercommercial society, how does a highly-concentrated culture industry represent a subject like the environment? Kellner (1995) notes that the general rule is to appeal to the

[1] Bell (2012) notes that Hasbro is planning at least five more movies based on its games, including *Candy Land*, *Ouija*, and *Monopoly* .

lowest (and largest) "common denominator" by avoiding topics that are too controversial while choosing issues that resonate with a broad audience (16-17), creating what Barnes (2010) terms "tent-pole productions" that draw in as many viewers as possible. The fact that a majority (61%) of Americans consider themselves "environmentalists" or "sympathetic" to environmental efforts (Dunlap, 2010) means that an increasing number of studios have incorporated environmental themes into many of their recent productions[2]. Once studios focus on the environment, however, they must make delicate decisions regarding *how* to portray it, for its representation invites consideration of the role of human activity – including consumption – in the formation and continuance of environmental problems. For an industry engaged primarily with the act of *selling*, the environment thus becomes both an alluring yet precarious topic to cover.

Ingram (2004) observes that one way studios can address environmental problems *and* cater to corporate ownership is to approach the subject from a *mainstream* environmental perspective, which places "environmental concerns within the needs of a capitalist economy to sustain commodity consumption, profit maximization and economic growth" (13). *The Happening* (20th Century Fox, 2008) provides an instantiation: although the plot focused on trees killing humans to stop their mindless consumption, Apple products featured throughout the film contradicts the anti-consumption message. In their "eco-critical" reading of the *Fast and Furious* film franchise (from the 1950s original to the more contemporary remakes), Murray and Heumann (2007) observe that although more information has become available in the last few decades about the global scale of environmental degradation, the films continue to "advocate a heightened abuse of nature and ecosystems" that work within central themes of consumption (144). These examples are not isolated:, McDonough and Brereton (2010) note that "filmic

[2] Examples include *Erin Brokovich*; *A Civil Suit*; *The Day After Tomorrow*; *The Constant Gardener*; *The Happening*; *Promised Land*; *Fern Gully*; *Ice Age 2*; *Happy Feet*; *Wall-E*; and *The Lorax*.

representations of nature, while multifarious, have a tendency to present nature as the resource for business and the market to engage in economic progress" (133). Thus, representation of the environment in Hollywood is subject to what Beder (1998) refers to as "economic framing," where the environment is defined only through its relevance to the capitalist system.

Although the movie industry is the focus of this research, there are clear parallels to other sectors of the media industry due to conglomerations' cross ownership of both news and entertainment industries. Similar to the movie industry, environmental problems in commercial news are: ignored or marginalized (Heinz, 2005; Beder, 1998); presented as dramatized, episodic events with clear "good" and "bad" guys (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007; Anderson, 1997); solved through technology (Schor, 2009); provided with little or no context to help the reader understand the complexity of the issue (Corbett and Durfee, 2004; Beder, 1998); and subordinated to competing commercial interests (Hansen 2010; Beder, 1998). The similarities between the news and entertainment industries reveal that the way Hollywood treats a subject like the environment is not an exception to the rule; instead, the consistent subjugation of environmental concerns is part of a broader capitalist logic in a concentrated market.

Ideological Implications of Representations of the Environment

Hansen (2010) contends that "The artifacts of media culture are… not innocent entertainment but are thoroughly ideological artifacts bound up with political rhetoric, struggles, agendas, and policies" (p. 8). Mediated representations of the environment are important to study when it comes to youth because, although children learn about the world around them from myriad sources – including family, community leaders, school, and peers – they are developing increasingly intimate relationships with technology and mediated content due to media

proliferation. Animated films provide "intricate teachings" that are reinforced by other sources in childhood (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth (2008, p. 167), and encourage specific understandings about individuals' place in society (Giroux, 2010. p. 84), which is relevant when considering how children consider their role in environmental problems faced on a global scale. For this reason, Mayumi et al. (2005) argue that popular films need to address environmental issues because of their educational role and potential to reach a broad audience. The clear educational potential of film invites discussion as to what sorts of lessons about the environment are given to children by a hypercommercial, concentrated culture industry.

Theoretical and Interpretive Frameworks

In order to understand the messages about the environment sent to young media audiences, this research analyzes *Ice Age 2*, *Wall-E*, and *The Lorax*. The films were chosen using two criteria: that the environment be a central narrative in each film; and that each film be produced by a Hollywood "major."

In their critical work on Marx's *Das Capital*, Althusser and Balibar (2009) broadly define *symptomatic reading* as a "dual reading" (32) that consists of an initial interpretation of a text focusing on manifest details (in this case, the narrative and characters), followed by a "second," deeper reading designed to reveal ideological messages through identification of key "lacunae," or silences in the text (86). The central purpose of a symptomatic reading is to elucidate the *problematic*, which Althusser and Balibar describe as "an answer given to its absent question" (32). Storey (2012) provides a clear demonstration of the utility of identifying "silences" about the environment through the problematic, noting that the common depiction of automobiles as

isolated in natural settings is a way to counteract potential questions about cars' contribution to both pollution and road congestion:

> …showing cars in both nature (unpolluted) and space (uncongested) confronts the claims… In this way, the criticisms are answered without the questions themselves having been formally posed. The emphasis placed on nature and space is, therefore, a response to the twin questions (which remains unasked in the advertisement itself – in the text's 'problematic'… (75-76).

Here, Storey reveals the *a priori* "answer" provided by advertisers to perceived concerns about environmental impact. It is this advance answer to as-yet unarticulated concerns that creates key *lacunae* within a text, for the *problematic* often serves to silence future questions by making them appear irrelevant. In symptomatic interpretation, then, the first reading examines the manifest text and progresses to identify the "lapses, distortions, silences and absences" characteristic of the latent text and its ideological foundations (Storey, 2012, p 244). In permitting a focus on silences, the key reason to using this interpretive framework is able to highlight what media producers may want to ignore – or actively deflect attention away from.

Applied to this research, there are several potential "silences" regarding environmental problems that can be examined in the films including: 1) what problems exist; 2) how they are defined; 3) what their causes are; 4) who is responsible; 5) the potential impacts and consequences; and 6 what solutions are available. As Entman (1993) notes, "omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience" (p. 54). The assessment of silences reveals the problematic embedded in the texts as well as the films' subjectivity – how they invite their young audiences into certain identities. This type of interpretation coheres with Althusser's critical praxis, where ideology is

defined by a relationship between the producer of a text and the subject, including how the subject is positioned by the text (Althusser, 2008).

Analysis

Manifest reading

Ice Age 2: The Meltdown. Fox Searchlight Pictures released this film as the second sequel in the *Ice Age* franchise that focuses on the adventures of a small pack of ice-age mammals: "Sid" the sloth; "Diego" the saber-toothed tiger; and "Manny" the woolly mammoth. The Environmental Media Association, which works with Hollywood studios on their environmental rhetoric, gave it their highest award in 2007. The film begins with a vignette of "Scrat," a squirrel who gives perpetual chase for an elusive acorn. He finds it, but in the process pokes holes in a giant ice wall that begins to spout water. In this way, the film introduces the concept of climate change and attendant melting ice in a comical fashion as Scrat attempts to stop the flow of water with various body parts. Once the central part of the film begins, it is clear that "global warming" (identified by that name in several scenes) is impending. At first no one believes the claims, but most animals become alarmed once the veracity of the warming is established, and a character named "Fast Tony" benefits from the confusion by selling useless "survival" items. The animals travel together in a group to a "boat" (made out of gargantuan piece of curved wood) to escape the flood and the carnivorous monsters freed by the melting ice. Eventually, a portion of the ice wall holding back the water breaks and the flood occurs, appearing as gigantic waves cresting mountaintops that thunder towards the animals. It looks as though all animals will perish until Scrat reappears: prized acorn in paw, he punctures a second set of holes in the wall, creating a fissure through which all the water can escape. Once the

waters recede, the consequences of the melting ice are revealed: areas once covered in ice are replaced with green pastures; Sid capitalizes on the remaining water to start a swim school; Manny finds the rest of his herd and realizes his species is not extinct. The film ends on a positive note for all animals except one: a turtle that was killed by the monsters.

Wall-E. This film was the brainchild of Pixar executives operating under Disney after its acquisition in 2006. In addition to winning numerous awards and nominations for cinematic quality[3], Keim (2008) in *Wired Magazine* described it as "the decade's most powerful environmental film." *Wall-E* opens on a somber note with a slow aerial pan of a large American city at dusk with large skyscrapers below. More detail is provided until it is gradually revealed that the majority of the "buildings" are actually thousands of stacked trash cubes.

From this point, the film quickly introduces the audience to the significant environmental problems on earth: mountains of trash that seems to have no end; massive dust storms; and no vegetation or humans anywhere, since earth can no longer support life. The role of large corporations in this environmental apocalypse is made clear through the vestiges of "Buy N Large" (BNL): old billboards for the corporation clutter the skyline; "dollar" bills littering the ground are actually BNL currency; and a "public service announcement" reveals that the last American president was the CEO of BNL.

Few creatures survive in this desolate landscape: one is "Wall-E," a solar-powered, rusty, dirty, slightly crazy, but likeable robot whose task is to clean up the world while the humans live on a large spaceship. The only other organism that has survived is a cockroach that Wall-E keeps as a pet. In his loneliness he has become an obsessive collector of trash, saving jewelry boxes,

[3] Best Original Screenplay (Academy Awards) and Best Film (American Film Institute), among others.

lighters, car keys, an iPod that plays "Hello Dolly," and apple "mice" that scurry across the floor when he comes home.

The film then introduces the audience to the superficial lives of humans on the spaceship who are: overweight due to lack of physical activity and continuous involvement with computer screens; controlled by BNL; and obsessed with consumption. The catalyst for positive change comes not from the humans but in the form of a new robot called Eve-A. Luminously white, sleek, powerful, and weightless (unlike Wall-E, she never touches the ground and can fly), she is the one who proves that earth is habitable again, fights off the bad guys (BNL robots), and helps to bring a potentially-enlightened group of humans back to earth who have learned important lessons.

***The Lorax*.** This Universal Pictures film won several awards, including *Teen Choice* and *Kids Choice*. The film is based on Dr. Seuss' book of the same name that is widely considered an unequivocal critique of American consumer culture and a chronicle of "the human race's ecological crimes" (Little, 2012). Similar to the first two films, *The Lorax* focuses on a specific environmental problem – in this case, the loss of indigenous forests and wildlife. The narrative focuses on Ted, a young boy who lives in an artificial landscape devoid of natural vegetation. The suburb in which he lives contains semblances of plant life – colorful plastic trees and flowers – but they are entirely manufactured. Due to the lack of trees, as well as the nearby factories, the air quality is so low that one company – run by the uniformly charmless and single-minded businessman Mr. O'Hare – sells bottled air to those who can afford it. Ted, like most of the town's younger inhabitants, is not concerned about the loss of living trees because he does not know that real ones ever existed. He plays with his remote-controlled airplane, rides his

sleek razor-type scooter around town, and shyly chases after his female neighbor. Once he hears about the existence of trees, however, he goes in search of a knowledgeable yet elderly recluse named "The Oncler" who holds the key to the mystery of their disappearance: all the trees were destroyed, he explains, through the production of "thneeds," odd-looking items that serve only an ornamental purpose. In his desire for profit, the Oncler did not listen to a small creature called the "Lorax" who lived in the forest and tried to stop its destruction. The Lorax provides the moral compass in the film: he knows that needless consumption is wrong and that trees are needed for a healthy environment. Ted's ultimate attempt to reintroduce a tree into the environment is thwarted by O'Hare, who thinks enlightenment of the population will hurt his business. Through Ted, O'Hare is defeated and the people in the town realize the importance of trees for environmental health. In the end, wisdom about the connection between overconsumption and environmental degradation resonates across generations, enabling the natural environment to thrive.

Symptomatic Reading

The films described above have clear commonalities and differences. The films are distinct in the type of environmental issue addressed and overall narrative and characters. The similarities, however, are more numerous, and involve broader themes of consumption through key omissions. The following section includes the results of the "second" Althusser and Balibar (2009) reading to identify crucial silences and what they reveal about Hollywood's treatment of environmental issues for young audiences.

Ice Age 2: The Meltdown. At a superficial level, Fox Searchlight's *Ice Age* sequel can be seen as an environmental film in that it provides an introduction to – and encourages awareness of – "global warming" by making the issue central to the narrative and by speaking directly to the child audience about environmental degradation. In addition, the film presents it as an authentic and considerable threat: the animals' terror of both the approaching mountainous waves and the sea monsters they bring provide clear cues that climate change brings significant danger and requires attention for its resolution. In this sense, the film introduces a sense of *realism* as described by Ingram (2004) and Whitley (2012), where texts make a claim to events in the outside world. Ties to the real world, however, dissolve when one considers omissions in the text.

One of the first silences in the film is there is no clear definition of "global warming": it is presented only as a warming trend that results in melting ice and floods, which is reinforced by the continuous use of the outdated and misleading phrase for climate change. Also absent is any clear *cause* of the warming: it cannot be due to human activity, as there are no humans in the film, which is a significant absence given that the vast majority of scientific data reveals that human activity is at the very least partly responsible for these changes (Spotts, 2011). Instead, the film hints that "Scrat" the squirrel has precipitated the disaster through his comical hunt for a nut. The text contains the same silence regarding possible resolutions: the animals are doomed to drown in the flood until Scrat once again intervenes and the flood waters recede. Perhaps the most important lacuna exists in the lack of consequences: after the flood, almost every animal has a better life in a warmer, greener environment.

The numerous silences in the film – regarding the definition, causes, consequences, and solutions for climate change – fulfill the function of the problematic to preclude additional

questions and ward off critique by presenting "global warming" as a simple phenomenon with an unknown etiology that can be resolved quickly and simply to the benefit of living creatures. This representation serves to alleviate concerns over a very serious and complex issue by hinting that climate change, far from being a threat to life, actually benefits it.

Wall-E. Unlike *Ice Age 2*, *Wall-E* defines its environmental problem and attendant consequences very clearly: overconsumption, operating within a powerful consumer culture driven by large corporations, is devastating the planet. The film makes clear which parties are responsible for the degradation: equal blame is assigned to both the large corporation "Buy N Large" as well as the humans who have let this happen. The text invites audiences to be horrified by overconsumption's catastrophic effect on the environment, including the devastated natural landscape but also the deteriorated human mind and body, providing an "overt" critique of consumerism, as Murray and Heumann (2009) note. In so doing, the film "risks engagement with controversial elements of the environmentalist agenda in more overt ways than any previous animation" (Whitley, 2012, p. 141) and appears to be an example of the "radical" environmentalism defined by Ingram (2004) that operates outside the typical consumerist milieu. However, like *Ice Age 2*, there are significant silences that become apparent in the latter half of the film with the comparison of Wall-E to Eve.

Wall-E, with his rusty, aging body that functions as a trash compactor, represents humans' past sins of overconsumption and willful ignorance. Firmly rooted to the ground, he is cumbersome and dirty, representing the trash he is trying to organize. By stark contrast, Eve's weightlessness and luminosity hint that she has no negative impact on the earth: she's a different breed of technology that represents a clean, enlightened future. Significantly absent from her

presentation is an explanation of her actual role in a clean environment. Does she represent a break from older patterns of wasteful manufacture, overconsumption, and environmental degradation? Eve's physical form itself presents the *problematic*, for her spotless body seems associated with no waste at all, and thus can allay the potential concerns of young audiences watching the film regarding her role in earth's future.

The silences surrounding Eve's production invite additional exploration of this unusual heroine into a film critiquing consumption. The first important clue about Eve comes from Disney's acquisition of Pixar two years prior to the creation of *Wall-E* that enabled Steve Jobs, founder of Pixar and Apple, to become a board member and largest shareholder at Disney (La Monica, 2006). It was Jobs' influence at the three companies involved – Pixar, Disney, and Apple – that shaped the creation of both Wall-E and Eve. According to Stanton, Wall-E's director (in Siklos, 2008), "I wanted Eve to be high-end technology - no expense spared - and I wanted it to be seamless and for the technology to be sort of hidden and subcutaneous. The more I started describing it, the more I realized I was pretty much describing the Apple playbook for design." The way in which Eve was designed (through meetings with Stanton and creative designers at Apple) prompted Siklos (2008) to note "It may be the first time a character was based on a true corporate sibling." The collaboration between the corporations explains the product placements in the film, including the Apple "mice" in Wall-E's home, Wall-E's classic Apple start-up "chime" when he reboots, and Disney's *Hello Dolly* shown on an iPod. It is important to note, however, that *Wall-E* represents a new trend in Hollywood away from mere product placement: "People talk about how products and brands will sponsor movies ... that's what's going to happen. But Apple has already done that here without being directly involved… I would call it product *homage*. And that is way more valuable than product placement. It doesn't

just reinforce a single Apple product, it reinforces Apple's *entire design approach* from MacBook to iPod to iPhone." (McQuivey, in Bulik, 2008, emphases added).

Returning to the problematic, *Wall-E* provides assurance that, while humans have made mistakes, the environment will be protected in the future with a combination of enlightenment and cleaner technology. But it is important to note that it is not just any technology – or any corporation – that can provide a sustainable future. "Buy N Large," a thinly-veiled reference to giant discount retailers like Wal-Mart, is a hazard for the environment, as is older technology and overweight individuals, whose "middle America" obesity stands in for the gluttony and selfishness associated with mindless consumption. Thus, while the film purports to criticize environmental degradation due to overconsumption, it really functions as a critique of the working and middle classes, for it is only the *wrong* type of consumption (say, buying in bulk at discount prices) that leads to catastrophe.

Ultimately, there appear to be three messages contained in the film. In the first half, young audiences receive the messages that humans live on a finite planet with limited natural resources and that overconsumption is harmful for the environment. The message delivered in the second half of the film, which completely contradicts and disarms the power of the first two messages, is that the purchase of Apple products is good for the planet. Children are invited to see Eve – and associated Apple products – as part of the solution to environmental problems rather than an integral part of the old, destructive consumption pattern. Thus, although there is initially an "ecologically attuned version of environmental attentiveness" that Whitley (2008, p. 150) recognizes, the message is completely undercut by the fact that Apple products provide the starring roles.

The Lorax. Universal Picture's *The Lorax* contains an environmental message that can be distilled into one clear point: mindless consumption of useless "thneeds" unequivocally causes environmental destruction. The film defines deforestation and loss of wildlife habitat clearly, as it does the consequences: the forests are not able to grow fast enough to sustain high demand for products, and the loss of native forest precipitously decreases biodiversity and harms humans. The film also identifies the cause of environmental damage clearly, placing responsibility for the destruction on both the corporations that mass produce "thneeds" as well as the people that engage in overconsumption. The film (like the book) parodies the "fads" prevalent in consumer culture where useless items are collected and highly prized for a short time, providing a powerful critique of American hypercommercialism.

The film falters slightly by individualizing the problem in the form of both the young boy Ted and the evil Mr. O'Hare. Ingram (2004) notes that Hollywood often avoids a strong critique of consumer culture through *individualization*, where blame for environmental problems is placed on one bad person or corporation: by this logic, once that person or organization is stopped, an entire environmental issue is resolved. In *The Lorax*, Ted is seen as the solution to the problem of deforestation: he alone can bring a healthy environment back. Conversely, Mr. O'Hare provides the one impediment to Ted's endeavors: Ted must defeat him before the environment can thrive. The film thus presents a simplistic solution to a very complex problem and ignores the deep structural realities and complexities of environmental degradation.

On the whole, however, *The Lorax* avoids the central silences observed in the first two films regarding environmental problems. For the most part, it also avoids the rampant product

placement seen in *Wall-E*[4]. The one true lacuna is closely tied to the film's marketing. The fact that the film had over seventy product tie ins (Henner, 2012), including products like Hewlett Packard printers (using "green" packaging) and a new Mazda Hybrid SUV, prompted *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott (2012) to note that "The movie is a noisy, useless piece of junk, reverse-engineered into something resembling popular art in accordance with the reigning imperatives of marketing and brand extension."

The silence regarding real solutions to environmental problems, paired with the mass marketing that accompanied the film, points to the problematic: the problem with consumption of "thneeds," according to the movie, is that they are not green enough. What is needed is not less consumption, but more "sustainable" consumption. The film thus accomplishes an elegant *sleight of hand*: while the movie itself provides a compelling critique of consumption, the child-focused marketing surrounding the film reassures young audiences that they will not hurt the environment if they simply consume the "right" way. The incorporation of this problematic precludes discussion of environmentally-friendly alternatives like *reducing* consumption and *reusing* existing goods.

Ideological Implications of the Symptomatic Reading

Analysis reveals that there are common ideological threads woven through the films. All three movies present real environmental issues as urgent and worthy of attention. This type of portrayal has the potential to underscore the serious nature of environmental degradation for young audiences and provide a call to change, as Mayumi et al. (2005) note. Unfortunately,

[4] In the opening scene, Ted kneels down to play with his toy aircraft. What becomes visible at this angle are Ted's shoes: white high tops with a black circle near the ankle that resemble Converse All Stars. During the film release, the Converse website and other stores displayed shoes featuring *The Lorax* characters.

while the problems presented in the films are "real" in the sense that they correlate to ongoing environmental concerns, significant silences about viable solutions serve to undercut any serious message about environmental protection. Specifically, the films studiously avoid identifying individual sacrifice and change as the answer: in *Wall-E* the environment was saved by enlightened Apple products; in *The Lorax* people just needed to plant one tree after deposing an evil CEO; and in *Ice Age 2* all the animals needed to do to survive the effects of climate change was to move to a different neighborhood.

Accompanying key omissions is individualization: as Ingram (2004) notes, the consequences of individualization are two-fold: it both obscures the complexity of environmental problems and reduces them to a simple cause-and-effect set of circumstances. The films attempt to reassure children that their role in environmental problems is negligible, that one person or entity will fix it for them, and that the American consumerist lifestyle is not only acceptable but needed for a healthy environment. In sum, while all three films appear to adopt what Ingram (2004) terms radical environmentalism, their "environmental" messages are entrenched within a capitalist framework, reinforcing a mainstream, consumerist mindset.

The finding that these environmental films "reproduce capitalist ideologies" (Ingram, 2004, p. 14) is perhaps no surprise: as Whitley argues, sustainability rhetoric in the "West" is "designed to accommodate relatively minor changes in outlook and lifestyle to the underlying norms of economic growth and productivity" (2012, p. 2). However, the consequences of doing so is striking: Hollywood takes an issue that has the potential to provide serious critique of existing consumer culture and effectively removes the critique through commodification, turning the environment into simply another product in the concentrated media marketplace.

The subordination of environmental concerns to what McAllister (2006, p. 273) calls the "economic imperative" results in a paradox: commercial media, playing an increasingly central role in children's lives, are the very source that will *not* provide children with accurate and useful information about the environment that is crucial to their futures. The American media oligarchy effectively removes "alternative viewpoints" and enables "corporate media to promote dominant ideas and frame public discussion and debate" (Andersen and Gray, 2007, p. 97). The lack of critical perspective about environmental issues is undergirded by an absence of discussion about how we have gotten to this point. McChesney (2004) argues that "as marketers intrude deeper into our children's lives… hypercommercialization goes mostly unmentioned in the media or political culture (p. 165). As a result, the general public is not often allowed "behind the curtain" to observe how the media industry works.

Different generations learn different behaviors and perspectives: "At base, generational differences are cultural differences: As cultures change, their youngest members are socialized with new and different values" (Twenge et al., 2012, p. 1045). The Althusserian perspective that ideology is related to the construction of the audience as a particular *subject* provides one clue as to how this socialization occurs in the current hypercommercial media landscape: while these Hollywood films give superficial attention to the need for community and care for the environment, they "hail" their young audiences solely as consumers and not citizens, leaving little room for the construction of other potential subjectivities or identities. As Giroux and Pollock (2010) note, media monopolies like Disney transform "kids' culture [into] not merely a new market for the accumulation of capital but a petri dish for producing new commodified subjects" (p.3). Through "environmental" films like those analyzed in this research, young

people are invited to approach the environment as self-interested consumers, a vantage point that fundamentally limits which solutions to environmental problems are considered viable.

Conclusion

Similar to major environmental problems like climate change, deforestation, and pollution, U.S. media formations underscore their importance by ignoring international borders. Although the subject matter of this research is Hollywood film – and, by inference, U.S. audiences – it is clear that the reach of the American culture industry goes well beyond the borders of the U.S. Disney's most recent blockbuster *Frozen* provides an excellent example of U.S. media's global influence: grossing close to $1.2 billion from worldwide box office (Lynskey, 2014), it was released in 41 different countries worldwide (National Public Radio, 2014) and was number one at the box office in Japan for almost three months (BBC News, 2014). Miller et al. (2004) describe Hollywood as a global industry that dominates the not only the cultural landscape of the U.S. but also the media culture of other countries, making a clear case for cultural imperialism. As awareness of the urgency of international environmental problems continues to rise, the culture industry continues to make the environment a central focus; at the same time, however, it does a serious disservice to young audiences by undercutting any meaningful messages about sustainable change and deflecting attention away from personal responsibility and towards increased consumption. It is this "dual message" of environmentalism framed by consumerist pursuits that provides the "green screen" metaphor in the title of this research.

As Giroux and Pollock (2010) argue, it is essential to secure "young people's right to learn and think deeply about the effects of their actions within the complex network of human

and animal life on this planet…. A critical education that explores the complexity of self and society… is the only way to equip youth with compelling reasons for why they should choose not to taint their innocence by inadvertently colluding in processes that further… the world's problems" (88). McChesney (2008) observes that "If we learn nothing else from the political economy of media it is that commercialism comes at a very high price and with massive externalities" (p. 20). The externalities, in this case, relate to massive environmental damage as the cost of doing business with the global child audience. Although there is existing scholarly work recognizing a potentially symbiotic relationship between capitalism and care for the environmental (see Arsel and Buscher, 2012 on neoliberal markets and Brockington et al., 2008 on capitalism and conservation), this research contends that increasing levels of consumption and trends of hypercommercialism on a global scale are pushing the world towards an ecological tipping point (Schor, 2009). As powerful conglomerates continue to expand their influence in an international marketplace, needed is a greater diversity of voices to repeatedly confront the flood of commercial messages and consumerist ideologies from the culture industry.

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